

Community-based ecotourism in the modern world

Best practices and common challenges

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Defining the concepts.....	5
2.1. Ecotourism.....	5
2.2. Community-based ecotourism.....	6
2.3. Research Ecotourism.....	6
3. Research methodology.....	8
3.1. Introduction of case examples.....	8
3.2. NGO-Community Collaboration in Ecotourism Case: Oaxaca, Mexico.....	8
3.3. Benefit distribution in ecotourism Case: Costa Rica.....	10
3.4. Community-based transboundary ecotourism Case: Kelabit highlands, Malaysia & Kerayan highlands, Indonesia.....	13
3.5. Research ecotourism in practice Case: Kaledupa, Indonesia.....	15
3.6. Community participation in ecotourism development Case: Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia.....	17
3.7. Locally initiated non-monetized ecotourism Case: Waluma West Ward, Papua New Guinea.....	19
4. Interview.....	21
4.1. Case: Duara Travels.....	21
5. Results and discussion.....	22
5.1. Best practices.....	22
5.2. Common challenges.....	25
6. Conclusion.....	26
7. References.....	28

List of tables and figures

Table 1 Arnstein's Ladder of citizen engagement.....	18
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1. Introduction

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing economic sectors and that sector has been dominated by multinational corporations and hotel chains for the majority of its existence (World Tourism Organization, 2016). Traditional tourism or consumptive tourism often neglects the viewpoint of the local population (M. Hafiz et al., 2014). A visit to any developing country popular amongst tourists reveals the reality of this situation. "Whilst the economic benefits of wildlife and biodiversity are diffuse and accrue to society in general, and financial benefits generally accrue to governments and external entrepreneurs, many of the costs are acute and borne locally" (Dixon and Sherman 1990; Wells 1992; Balmford and Whitten 2003). This does nothing to improve tolerance in local communities and, as a result, wildlife continues to decline through persecution and habitat destruction (Walpole and Thouless 2005).

In recent decades the ethical issues regarding travel and tourism created a platform for ecotourism and community-based ecotourism to flourish. Travelers started wanting to contribute to the destinations they discovered and the people and cultures they encountered on their travels in a positive way. Ecotourism has become a way to experience local wildlife and ecosystems in a non-consumptive way, protecting the natural environments by choosing sustainable lodging or ecofriendly tour operators. Community-based ecotourism is a step further into the world of sustainable travel. Enterprises work together with local communities to provide authentic experiences to travelers while contributing to the local economy in a way where the whole community profits. The goal is to empower local communities, raise economic equity, sustain the local ecosystem and wildlife and share cultures in a way that everybody profits. The only question is: is it a viable way to go about environmental conservation?

The main findings of this thesis demonstrate that if implemented correctly as part of a larger conservation effort, community-based ecotourism has a chance for long-term positive impact on the socioeconomic development of rural communities and their natural environments. The growing market of ecotourism however, is under less critical scrutiny than its big brother, non-consumptive or mainstream tourism and as such may often present a blurred image of the exact size and nature of the effect it has on a global scale.

I believe this topic is extremely relevant in this day and age as it affects the entire planet on a larger scale. Nature is intricately connected with all life, even ours, though we

forget that sometimes. Furthermore; I believe we should invest in preserving our environmental and cultural treasures for the next generation instead of cashing in as early as possible. Since tourism is an industry that will not cease anytime soon, it would be only logical and indeed sensible to cultivate it in a sustainable way where all parties profit. It is time to stop looking for the quick and easy buck and start thinking about long-term investment.

The purpose of this thesis is not to compare community-based ecotourism and mass tourism, but to examine the characteristics of successful community-based ecotourism initiatives and how these characteristics can be implemented in practice when developing a brand new community-based ecotourism project. The research questions are:

What aspects define a successful community-based ecotourism enterprise?

How can these aspects be implemented into a development strategy for a community-based ecotourism model?

2. DEFINING THE CONCEPTS

2.1. Ecotourism

In 2010, tourism and travel accounted for 9.2% or US \$5751 billion of the world's GDP (World Travel and Tourism Council (2010). Ecotourism captures \$77 billion of the global tourism market and is likely to accelerate as concern about global warming increases (The Kiplinger Letter, 2007). In 2007, ecotourism captured 7 percent of the international market, as estimated by the United Nations World Travel Organization (2007). The term "ecotourism" has been around as early as the late 70s, and by the early 90s, ecotourism had become the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry. The concept of ecotourism, however, is still relatively incorrectly perceived among most people. When the general population hear the term: "ecotourism", the first thing to come to mind is a more sustainable form of traditional tourism, mainly focusing on the environmental impacts. However; ecotourism is so much more than that. Although researchers and academics to this day continue to debate the exact definition of ecotourism, there are a few common characteristics that can be used to define the term today. Ecotourism aims for a less-consumptive form of tourism, but matters such as the equitable distribution of economic benefits among locals and protection of the local culture are raised to equal levels of importance.

The International Ecotourism Society (2000) defines the concept of ecotourism according to five components: "protection of ecological diversity; maintenance of residents' welfare; encouragement of environmentally friendly behavior among residents, tourists and tourism operators; reduced utilization of irreproducible resources; and community participation."

Ceballos-Lascuráin (1996) crystallizes the term: "Ecotourism is environmentally responsible travel and visitation to relatively undisturbed areas, in order to enjoy and appreciate nature that promotes conservation, has low visitor impact, and provides for beneficially active socio-economic involvement of local populations". The main objective of ecotourism is to provide local people economic benefits, while simultaneously maintaining the wellbeing of the environment. "Unlike many sustainable harvesting initiatives, ecotourism can consistently provide a return per hectare competitive with current land uses" (e.g., see Ceballos-Lascuráin 1996; Wunder 2000). Ecotourism initiatives provide financial support for local areas by implementing park entry fees, for example, and a viable economic incentive to create protected areas. Other benefits provided by ecotourism include but are not limited to

the sharing of knowledge about conservation between visitors and residents as well as generating environmental awareness via the word-of-mouth effect.

2.2. Community-based Ecotourism

Community-based ecotourism or CBET shares many of the aspects associated with traditional ecotourism; however, it goes an extra mile regarding the social component of ecotourism. CBET initiatives are built and managed by the community. The point is to live amongst the local people instead of sitting on the sidelines as bystanders. Community-based ecotourism emphasizes social ties, improved effectiveness of community participation, and socially integrating environmental protection within local communities (Campbell, 2002; Kiss, 2004).

Community-based ecotourism's main purpose is to increase community's carrying capacity by reducing tourism's negative impacts while enhancing the positive ones. Participation is not only about achieving the more efficient and more equitable distribution of material resources: it is also about the sharing of knowledge and the transformation of the process of learning itself in the service of people's self-development (Connell 1997: 250). This knowledge sharing is a key component of CBET and one of the important aspects that facilitates the success of an ecotourism venture, as we will later discuss using case examples.

There are similarities between different ventures, both in characteristics as well as the challenges they face. It is worth noting however, that each initiative is unique and as such there are no "one-size fits all"-solutions. CBET-projects are affected by their regional natural environment, the local culture and traditions, the country's political and economic landscape, just to name a few. We will be diving into a more in-depth analysis of these characteristics later on in this thesis.

2.3. Research Ecotourism

Research ecotourism is a sub-category of community-based ecotourism, which focuses on scientific research and volunteer work, mainly practiced in more remote locations. As such, the main consumers of research ecotourism are scientific researchers and volunteer tourists. Research ecotourism consists of ecotourism activities with the addition of individuals paying to conduct research and related actions. These activities are primarily directed towards conservation and monitoring of the natural environment as well as research involving villages

and local communities in programs which may be summarized as 'sustainable community development' (Clifton & Benson, 2006).

Research ecotourism often operates with support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as WWF. Opportunities to engage in research ecotourism are provided by a myriad of organizations: Coral Cay Conservation, Earthwatch and Trekforce, to name a few. These initiatives are generally targeted towards students, gap-year individuals and the retired, although some organizations may enforce an upper-age limit. Currently, there exists very little research on this sub-category of community-based ecotourism. Generally, research ecotourism attracts altruistic individuals with a thirst for self-discovery. However, these are characteristics that may be attributed to other types of travelers as well. A key difference between research ecotourists and regular ecotourists however; is that research ecotourists tend to stay in their destinations for extended periods of time, rather than travelling from one destination to another in rapid succession.

This form of ecotourism is by its very nature, less constrained by availability of infrastructure, for example transportation and accommodation. The focus of research ecotourism lies in research rather than a quality tourism experience, so for example, the quality of lodging is not a main concern. This is no surprise, as research ecotourism focuses on often remote and isolated areas with less explosive biodiversity, which, in addition, suffer from poor conservation management and are in need of better conservation efforts. Due to this aspect, research ecotourism can create a multiplier effect, magnifying the economic impacts of the initiative, which in turn creates added employment opportunities for local people and diversifies the local economy.

In spite of all this, research ecotourism also has its risks, just like any other form of tourism. For instance, the socio-cultural and economic impacts generated by research ecotourism may be different in magnitude compared to other forms of ecotourism, which can possibly damage the local way of life. The areas where research ecotourism operates usually have a stronger presence of tradition and religion, thus, the presence of outsiders can possibly leave a permanent negative impact on the community. For instance, the risk of visitors potentially violating these local traditions is ever present, leading to possible conflicts between residents and tourists. In addition, the presence of visitors may also lead to incepting local youth with unrealistic aspirations of wealth, creating problems in the community for generations to come. We will discuss research ecotourism later on in this thesis through a case study conducted by Clifton & Benson, (2006).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction of case examples

For this portion of the paper, we will discuss a few sources of literature detailing case examples and studies on community-based ecotourism in different areas across the globe. As mentioned earlier in this paper, each venture must be tailor made to fit the specific requirements of the area and its laws, traditions, cultures, ecosystem and political landscape. For this reason, the case examples provided in this thesis all represent different types of ecotourism, specifically tailored to the requirements of their environments. There is no specific model that will suit each CBET venture, but we will discuss similarities and common characteristics presented in these real-world examples of community-based ecotourism, to determine if there is a set of “best practices” that should be taken into account when formulating a development strategy for a brand new ecotourism initiative. The following case studies include destinations such as Mexico, Costa Rica, Papua New Guinea, Mongolia and Malaysia and span over a timeline from 2002 to 2013.

3.2. NGO-Community Collaboration in Ecotourism

Case: Oaxaca, Mexico

The first ecotourism project we will discuss in this thesis is the case of a community-based ecotourism venture located on the coast of Oaxaca, in Mexico. The article focuses on the role of NGOs (Non-governmental organizations) as enablers of community participation and diversified development through interaction of different cultural groups. In order to understand the endeavor and its criteria properly though, we must first inspect the regions history.

In 1958, the coast of Oaxaca was a wondrous epicenter of biodiversity. Fast-forward 40 years, and the forest coverage had been reduced by 50% of which only 20% resembled its former glory. Since then, the rate of deforestation has doubled. What led this once prosperous ecosystem into such a dire state? To answer this question, we must revisit the year 1984, when a mega-resort in Bahias de Huatulco was built in a previously isolated region, home to around 50,000 people from four different indigenous groups. This business move integrated the area into the international tourism market, but not without a price. The aftermath of the large business endeavor impoverished the native people through social and

special polarization. In October 1997, hurricane Paulina deepened these wounds. (Barkin & Bouchez, 2002)

In the midst of the turmoil, an NGO (Non-governmental organization) called the Centre for Ecological Support or CSE, for its Spanish initials, began working with local communities to regenerate smaller river basins as part of a larger effort to promote community welfare through the nursing of tropical dry forests back to health and replanting areas with endemic species of trees harboring both commercial and cultural value. The strategy pursued by the CSE was to place the forests conservation in a central role, while using complimentary activities, such as the establishment of an ecotourism destination, to ensure the economic viability of the venture. (Barkin & Bouchez, 2002)

The strategy implemented by the CSE followed a cyclical structure: The reforestation of the local area was supported by the local community, while at the same time supporting the local community, simultaneously shaping the area into an attractive environment for visitors interested in ecotourism offerings, which in turn would economically support the reforestation project (Barkin & Bouchez, 2002). Ecotourism was implemented in this case as a part of a larger conservation program. The ecotourism offerings would be owned and managed by the various indigenous communities participating in the project.

In theory the strategy was simple, but in practice quite complicated as it relied on working from the ground up and getting community members to actively participate. As part of the ecotourism offerings, bungalows were constructed by village residents, creating a space where visitors could pay for the privilege to live among the local communities and explore the area. The CSE in turn, participated in the programs through a series of trust funds, ensuring financial support from afar while empowering locals with hands-on management. The CSE along with indigenous authorities and local political representatives worked together to implement decisions about how outside assistance should be implemented in each community, therefore giving locals equal power over decision making, encouraging participation. (Barkin & Bouchez, 2002)

With the increasing worry of water, other organizations joined in supporting the CSE programs. The trust fund established a formula for a solid foundation for future activities, ensuring that prices would remain competitive but also sufficient enough to cover the direct costs of production as well as contribute to a fund dedicated to community activities and other environmental programs, embodying the essence of a fair trade movement. Integrating the programs into existing cultural structures was one of the many challenges of the program,

but the communities displayed the capacity to succeed in this. Future plans of the initiative include reserves for native flora and fauna, the possibility of such reserves for larger endangered mammals, and dependable capacity of fruit and vegetable supply to hotels for compensation reflecting fair prices. (Barkin & Bouchez, 2002)

As we can see from the article, there were a few key characteristics which enabled the success of the ecotourism initiative. For this particular venture, integrating ecotourism as a part of a larger conservation program was a crucial decision. The education of local residents, leading to participation in the ecotourism venture was of paramount importance. Education serves as a form of empowerment for the community. Furthermore, balancing the services provided with the local cultural structure was also an important aspect. In this case, financial support was offered to the ecotourism venture from afar, as well as advice. For the community to properly manage the venture, these factors as well proper training on how to share and exchange knowledge with visitors are a must to ensure the success of the program.

As for key challenges, capacity is key. The development of the ecotourism endeavor must be controlled to ensure that it stays as a complimentary part of the larger program, rather than dominating it. Gaining the participation of the locals as well as securing it for the future presented and continues to present a difficult challenge. In this case, the key aspects of success also present the most difficult challenges, and as we will see, this type of characteristic is not unique to this case alone.

3.3. Benefit distribution in ecotourism

Case: Costa Rica

This case concerns four communities in Costa Rica. Two of the communities examined in this study were involved in some form of ecotourism and the other two were not involved in ecotourism in any way.

The research hypotheses were as follows:

1. "Local development activities with greater local participation and equitable benefits distribution are more likely to generate perspective and behaviors favorable to conservation"

2. "Income generation alone is not sufficient to encourage conservation (other factors influencing attitudes and behaviors are: age, education, general well-being, and religion)"
3. "Ecotourism and economic development may negatively impact conservation through unintended or overlooked side-effects" (C.J. Stem et al., 2003)

The study used a few different methods for gathering research. Qualitative information was obtained using focus-group discussions, open-ended informal interviews, and direct observation (C.J. Stem et al, 2003). The quantitative study method used in this case was a researcher-administered survey (C.J. Stem et al., 2003).

The study largely confirmed the hypothesis that income generation by itself is not enough to encourage conservation.

On a broader scale, ecotourism can offer tangible economic benefits and in addition discourage logging and conversion of forests into agricultural land. However, little evidence was revealed to support the claim that direct employment in tourism generates a significant impact on household conservation practices. Indirect benefits of ecotourism, including training and idea-pooling had a stronger pro-environmental impact on local residents, cultural interaction with visitors was also found to be a greater encouragement of community participation in conservation practices, than economic benefits. The study argues that a greater emphasis should be placed on indirect benefits to encourage conservation, however, locals should still be rewarded with fair compensation for conservation. In addition, the study suggests that for truly successful results, ecotourism should be part of a larger pro-environmental operation, which should attempt to get the government involved with legal restrictions and policy reform. "Economic development priorities and biodiversity conservation should be intertwined to make informed choices on timber exploitation limits." For added meaningfulness for visitors as well as locals, ecotourism operators should organize cultural tours. (C.J. Stem et al., 2003)

The first hypothesis received mixed results. Higher levels of participation mean little if ecological awareness and education are not properly cultivated in the communities. Ecotourism operators should actively educate the local population on sustainability or in turn create incentives to make standing forests more valuable to both communities as well as local governments. Education should involve visitors as well, with an emphasis on ecological, social and cultural history of the region. (C.J. Stem et al., 2003).

As for the third hypothesis concerning possible negative impacts through unintentional side-effects, the research indicates that ecotourism is not necessarily non-consumptive. Quite paradoxically, the success of a community-based ecotourism venture may also be its downfall. An increase in popularity results in larger amounts of visiting tourists, leading to the unavoidable outcome of habitat disturbance and increased solid-waste generation along, not to mention the capacity issues that most, if not all community-based ecotourism projects face. In addition to this, and possibly the most severe negative impact is the commodification of culture (Brandon, 1996). The article also raises the question that should tourism levels suddenly plunge, would the forest lose its economic value and resume to be converted into agricultural land? (C.J. Stem et al., 2003)

The study concludes that under ideal circumstances, ecotourism can offer communities a chance for economic livelihood, coupled with an improvement of general well-being. Higher levels of awareness could result in successful long-term conservation practices. However, raising awareness is a time consuming task and should be pursued not only by ecotourism operations. In any case, the requirement of further studies in similar areas, especially research conducted over a time period of several years to measure benefits and impacts could help to better understand the nature of community-based ecotourism development.

The game changers brought up in this article correlate somewhat with the previous discoveries covered in this thesis. The cultural and environmental education of community members as well as visitors is found to be of paramount importance in securing effective community participation and creating a meaningful experience for tourists. The maximization of indirect local benefits as well as fair compensation is another important aspect in gaining success and promoting cooperation with local communities. With regards to local governments, financially tempting alternatives to resource exploitation must be presented in order to gain support and prompt action.

The greatest challenges associated with this example also correlate with the previous case. Capacity is a difficult issue, as well as raising environmental awareness, which in itself is a time-consuming endeavor. Seasonal fluctuations and political events also present a problem, as financial profits rely heavily on them. Local cultures are also often fragile and implementing development and managerial practices in cultural structures must be handled with great care.

3.4. Community-Based Transboundary Ecotourism

Case: Kelabit highlands, Malaysia & Kerayan highlands, Indonesia

The case example discussed here studies a transboundary community-based ecotourism model, located in the Kelabit highlands of Malaysia and the Kerayan highlands of Indonesia. The article highlights that strong local, governmental and international support exists for this particular venture (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009). The data provided in this study was obtained via interviews conducted with local practitioners of ecotourism in addition to other tour operators. The region in question sports some of the same characteristics as many other community-based ecotourism destinations. The area is renowned for its beautiful natural environment, the location is isolated and relatively undiscovered during the time this study was conducted, remains un-commercialized, and exhibits an exotic and authentic culture (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009). All of these aspects are known to attract ecotourists.

According to the study, the most important issues of focus should be:

1. Conservation and protection of forests and cultural sites as a focal point for ecotourism;
 2. Improved intercommunication between ecotourism actors;
 3. Highlighting transboundary trekking options;
 4. Preparation for increased tourism and fair income-distribution on a grass-roots level;
 5. Cautious infrastructure upgrades concerning ecotourism;
 6. Improving the resolving and handling of legal issues spawning from both visitor and guide border crossing and
 7. Maintaining local power over the management of ecotourism and the shaping of ecotourism development in the future
- (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009).

The region is practically a “Goldilocks”-zone for ecotourism. The natural sites have yet to be converted into logging areas and the communities living in the area have a strong cultural continuity. These are rare conditions just right for ecotourism to provide a possible long term benefit. However, similarly to other cases, the local government presents a problem, as ecotourism is one of many types of uses proposed for the area and conflicts with the governments other interests.

The article referenced here, along with others, maintains that addressing inequalities and to actually make ecotourism work in a sustainable and ethical way, local communities must be involved as stakeholders (Berno, 2003; Burns, 2003; GFC, 2008; McLaren, 1997; Pointing, 2001; Scheyvens, 1999; Stronza, 2005; Twining-Ward & Twining-Ward, 1998). This also provides a significant challenge. "Tourism has either been disproportionately credited with all the good effects, or has received more than its fair share of the blame for the bad effects. A balanced discussion of the subject is rarely found, if at all, in Malaysia" (Din, 1997).

This ecotourism initiative presents similar problems as with other ecotourism destinations; a lack of indicators, difficulty measuring and monitoring change, carrying capacity and development as well as a lack of existing criteria. Countries legal systems and bureaucracy are also slow to react to change and therefore governmental support for ecotourism initiatives is difficult to obtain. This is highlighted by the fact that travel agencies promoting ecotourism in Malaysia are mostly new, with 4 to at most 6 years of experience, according to a study conducted by Lim (1999). However, a lot could have changed in this time. Another characteristic of ecotourism in Malaysia is that they have little to no relation with the local government (Lim, 1999).

It is worth noting that not all ecotourism is beneficial. "Many academic circles argue that the goals of ecotourism can conflict with the goals of conservation and preservation of cultural traditions, as well as local livelihoods" (Isaacs, 2000; Kirkpatrick, 2001; Langholz, 1999; Maikhuri, Rana, Rao, Nautiyal, & Saxena, 2000). Most of the activities hosted by the venture are fun, but lacking of knowledge-sharing on the natural environments. Another common theme in ecotourism, which appears in the case of this project as well is the conflicting interests of government, the private sector and locals. There exists a solution for this, albeit a difficult one: Discussion and intercommunication, finding common ground. Each stakeholder undeniably relies on one another.

In conclusion regarding this article: more grass-roots monitoring conducted by independent researchers and scientists on the impact of ecotourism is needed (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009). This case also has unique political landscape due to the transboundary nature of the initiative, bringing with it unique challenges regarding the legal systems and political impacts of two countries instead of one, which requires extensive inter-governmental communication (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009). A common threat to ecotourism which has surfaced in all studies so far is logging of the area and conversion into agricultural land. Other

challenges include promotion, communication, equitable distribution of benefits, tourism infrastructure improvement, local control and legal issues (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009). Finally, the study places importance on the assessment of the successes and failures of other ventures and learning from them (S.L. Hitchner et al., 2009).

3.5. Research ecotourism in practice

Case: Kaledupa, Indonesia

In this section of the paper, we will discuss the impacts, benefits and challenges of research ecotourism using a case study conducted by Julian Clifton and Angela Benson and published in the *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* in 2006. The research was conducted in 2001 and 2002 in Wakatobi marine park in Sulawesi, Indonesia. At the time of the study, Indonesia's annual visitor amount had decreased by 2.3% from the previous year (World Tourism Organization, 2003). It is worth noting, that, in 2003 there was a large outbreak of the SARS virus in southeast Asia, in addition to this, the world was shaken by global terrorist activities and retaliation actions by western governments, which was believed to be the cause of the annual decline (Clifton & Benson, 2006). The bombing of two Bali nightclubs as in October 2002 and the Marriot Hotel explosion in August 2003 struck fear in tourists and quickly popularized the idea that Indonesia was an unsafe destination for western citizens (Clifton & Benson, 2006). This further illustrates the point that each region is affected by unique circumstances, and negative circumstances such as an unstable political landscape can be detrimental to all forms of tourism.

The goal of the paper is to identify impacts of "research ecotourism" in a developing country characterized by a limited and slowly developing ecotourism industry in the context of understanding the characteristics and motivations of research ecotourists and the implications this may hold for tourism planners and managers (Clifton & Benson, 2006). Concern has been generated by the overuse and misuse of the term ecotourism and this is discussed in many different forms of literature regarding ecotourism. Most authors agree that the market for ecotourism has enjoyed growth greater than that of the general tourism sector, despite lack of agreement on the term "ecotourism" and the problems this has caused with measuring the effect of ecotourism. Governments are increasingly aware of the growing demand for ecotourism and the existing market of visiting pristine natural environments while they're still here, so to speak (Clifton & Benson, 2006). The growth of this market

segment is largely due to the reasons mentioned above, coupled with international conventions to develop ecotourism as an alternative source of income to facilitate the management of the growing number of protected areas has put a lot of pressure on the local government.

So, with the rapid growth and increasing popularity of ecotourism, one might ask: Is ecotourism set to replace regular mass-tourism as the go-to form of tourism in the future? While the growing buzz around ecotourism is undoubtedly a positive thing, it brings with it many risks and challenges. There is always the risk of ecotourism opening the gate for mass tourism in host countries as popularity increases. With the uncontrollable increase of annual visitors, maintaining attractions and lodging at that great of a scale while trying to stay true to the sustainable values of ecotourism simply is not possible. Research of visitor characteristics can help provide insight to help avert negative impact on local communities as well as information on how to adjust the service to meet the expectations of the ecotourism market. One of the goals of these studies is to help predict tourism development and thereby steer clear of bad outcomes. However, for this to work, these analyses must be suited to circumstances where a reliable market exists, economic conditions such as exchange rates and economic growth favor the growth of international tourism and most importantly, political developments don't affect the accessibility of the destination for tourists (Clifton & Benson, 2006). According to the article, it is increasingly unlikely to find areas that match all of these requirements.

For the purposes of this study, sixty semi-structured interviews were conducted with residents of four Kaledupan villages, which focused on the perceived impacts on the local economy and culture. Interviews included experiences with visitor interactions, individual ability to benefit economically from visitors, resident behavior, etc. "The dominant attitude towards research ecotourism identified through interviews was one of acceptance and enthusiasm" (Clifton & Benson, 2006). The genuine interest of the local culture and admiration of the environment in the research ecotourists sparked an enhanced sense of pride in locals. Research gathered from the interviews suggested that the local community also placed significant value on informal interactions with visitors and the opportunity to learn English.

The research concluded that research ecotourism is a very beneficial option in "off the beaten path"-locations such as the one mentioned in the paper. While research ecotourism has a smaller and more marginal economic impact, it may be more beneficial in

the long term for many destinations. The small scale of research ecotourism also means that it has a smaller likelihood of polluting the natural environments, unlike traditional ecotourism, where the risk is greater due to a larger capacity. While there were risks of negative socio-cultural impacts, both visitors and locals interacted with each other amicably. In conclusion, research ecotourism is also less vulnerable to politics, unlike other forms of ecotourism, which makes it a stable project in the long term and a version of ecotourism worth pursuing. (Clifton & Benson, 2006).

3.6. Community Participation in Ecotourism Development

Case: Bayan-Ulgii, Mongolia

This article focuses on the community of Sogoog in Bayan-Ulgii Mongolia. At the time of the study, the possibility of a CBET venture was merely evaluated. The purpose of the research presented in this article was: 1. To measure a community's desire and willingness to participate in ecotourism development and 2. The realistic potential for success in implementing a community-based ecotourism development initiative (S. Nault and P. Stapleton, 2011). The studies conducted were based on surveys, which in turn were realized by interview.

The main concern of respondents was overgrazing (49%) as well as climate (22%) and lack of water (20%) (S. Nault and P. Stapleton, 2011). Respondents' understanding of the concept of ecotourism development was highly mixed. This leads to the conclusion that the education of ecotourism and natural environment should be reinforced among locals. In addition, community members had a hard time understanding "sustainability", reflected by a somewhat naïve approach to ecotourism, illustrated by the suggested building of restaurants, hotels and ger camps (S. Nault and P. Stapleton, 2011). Further explaining needed for locals to understand the risks of tourism development.

Similar observations are offered in this study as with others: Initiatives must be carefully tailored to the needs of the local communities, their environment and political landscape. Yuksel, Bramwell, & Yuksel (2008) place an emphasis on the importance of the process rather than the outcome, due to the learning experience brought on organically by the process, which can help resolve disagreements among stakeholders in the future. Simpson (2008) proposes that even without local community participation, the local people should benefit in a social, economical and sustainable way, as community participation may be

“baggage” to some communities. Researchers clearly have different views on the subject of whether or not community participation is a necessity. Regardless of this, it is still vital to assess the already existing level of participation in the community. A model created by Arnstein (1969) details the different stages of community participation.

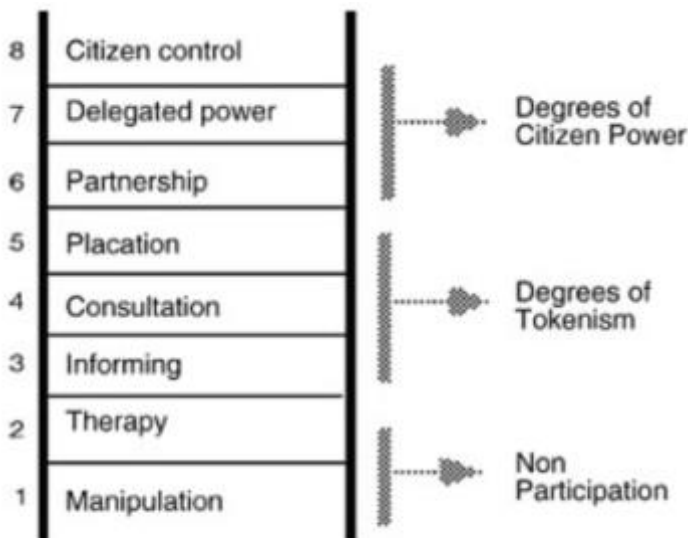


Fig. 1. Arnstein's ladder of citizen engagement ([3]).

Arnstein's ladder of citizen engagement has a total of eight steps, which are divided into three categories: Non-participation, Degrees of tokenism, and degrees of citizenship power. In the first stage of participation, called “manipulation”, power holders use participation as a distorted means of public relations. The second step, “therapy” is an extension of the first step and the last step in the “non-participation”-

category. In the “therapy”-stage, local citizens' values and attitudes are adjusted to those of the larger society with power.

The next category “degrees of tokenism” includes three stages: “informing”, “consultation”, and “placation”. In the “informing”-stage locals are informed of their rights, responsibilities and options. This step is the first and most important step towards legitimate public involvement. After this stage, residents are encouraged to express their opinions in the “consultation”-stage. Once the community has gone through these stages it reaches the “placation” stage, where public influence gradually grows, but is still largely regarded as tokenism.

After going through these stages, the community reaches the category on Arnstein's ladder known as “degrees of citizen power”. At this point, the community has reached the stage of “partnership”, which is the first stage regarded as actual participation of the community, where negotiation is conducted between citizens and power holders, thereby redistributing the power and responsibilities for planning and decision-making. The public achieves dominant power over decision-making in the “delegated power”-stage. Finally, citizens are awarded full control and power for policy and management in the “citizen control”-stage, which is the final step in Arnstein's model. The ladder of participation is

extremely useful for evaluating the current level of community participation but it also defines the necessary steps required to elevate involvement.

In addition to community participation, it should also be taken into consideration, that local communities are usually slower to notice viable opportunities in tourism regarding their own areas, than outside companies. The risk of rapid development resulting in no stakeholder having full control, leading to economic benefits to be missed by local communities is also present. Social and cultural structures existing in the community present a difficult challenge. "In the case of Sogoog, any ecotourism venture would have to take into account the powerful social cohesiveness of the community and include mechanisms to avoid upsetting this (S. Nault and P. Stapleton, 2011). If the implications of unequal power relationships as well as social networks engrained deeply into the community are not taken into account, ecotourism in its fullest potential cannot be fully realized (Belsky, 1999). In the introduction phase of NGOs and stakeholders entering a remote community, trust of the community towards outsiders is of paramount importance (Okazaki, 2008). This presents a time-consuming challenge for outside stakeholders.

3.7. Locally initiated non-monetized ecotourism

Case: Waluma West Ward, Papua New Guinea

This study is unique as the community-based ecotourism project was initiated by a local in Waluma, Papua New Guinea and outside participation was contained to be solely advisory. Additionally, no external financial support has been given or asked for and the economy it takes place in is non-monetized.

(H. Sakata & B. Prideaux 2013)

Due to these circumstances, at the time of this study, very little economic leakage was perceived, which was assisted by the fact that almost everything was supplied locally, generating a high multiplier effect (H. Sakata & B. Prideaux, 2013). Locals found the ecotourists to be beneficial to them. At first they were afraid of tourists destroying the natural environment but instead found that the tourists played a role as environmental educators and increased environmental awareness among the locals. The interaction between locals and tourists was seen as beneficial for both parties. Local people don't necessarily have the environmental knowledge for the best conservation practices and tourists gained a deeper understanding of the local cultural structure as well as traditions. As the environment is the

source of income for the local community, it is important that the community can learn where they should improve. As a result of these interactions, the local community established an environmental management organization and implemented ideas on how to elevate environmental awareness (H. Sakata & B. Prideaux, 2013). This interaction also increased the level of empowerment the community felt over their native lands.

With regards to ownership, the community agreed that with community ownership, many problems would occur over land and benefit distribution. The community settled on a local leader who is transparent in relation to income and revenue distribution (H. Sakata & B. Prideaux, 2013). It is worth mentioning that during the time of this study, the ecotourism initiative in Waluma was in a very early stage. "Communities pass through a sequence of reactions along with growing impacts of an evolving tourism industry in their area: from euphoria, apathy, irritation, and to antagonism" (Doxey, 1975). Waluma is placed on the euphoria stage in this study. The study also reported a positive reaction to change. Some communities can associate change with a loss of their culture, but in Waluma, the interviewees saw ecotourism as an invigorator of local customs and traditions, coupled with progress (H. Sakata & B. Prideaux, 2013).

The study concludes that there is potential for small-scale ecotourism projects in remote areas with little tourism activity, provided that some external assistance is secured. In Waluma, the only external assistance was purely advisory, and while the assistance was enough for Waluma to open its gates for tourists, it was insufficient to put Waluma on the map on a global scale or provide continuous management skills training (H. Sakata & B. Prideaux, 2013). Community consultation was found to be necessary in all stages of the project. So, in essence this type of initiative will always require some form of external assistance to keep the project afloat. However, the study also shows that the community did not require financial incentive to find the link between their environment and a source of income (H. Sakata & B. Prideaux, 2013). In fact, this type of externally posed incentive might be destructive in the future.

This study presents, that there is no simple solution that will work with every ecotourism project, but there are key aspects that are common to all projects. These include ownership issues, participation, monitoring of impacts and mutually agreed outcomes. These issues should be discussed between all stakeholders as well as within the community, to achieve consensus and contentment among all parties involved.

4. INTERVIEW

4.1. CASE: DUARA TRAVELS

In an attempt to gain further insight into community-based ecotourism, I decided to conduct a brief interview with the business mind and emerging market professional of Duara Travels, Elina Voipio. Duara is an online travel service, which specializes in connecting travelers with local communities across the globe. Duara aims to empower local communities and promote the development of micro-entrepreneurship. In our brief dialogue I asked Voipio three questions central to this thesis:

1. What is the most integral part of achieving local community participation in an ecotourism project, in your opinion?

Voipio: Our business revolves entirely around community participation. We feel that engaging in local day-to-day life is a valuable experience for travelers and we strive to direct the profits of tourism to those locals that don't normally benefit from tourism. In addition to directing profits (40%) to host-families, we distribute a portion of the profits (15%) to a larger community fund. The purpose of this is to benefit the entire community and to ensure that our initiative does not provoke needless jealousy within the community. The local community's positive relationship with Duara also benefits the travelers' safety.

2. What is your target customer segment and how do you reach it?

Voipio: We are currently still searching for a clear answer to this question ourselves. We have noticed, that defining our target segment by demographic characteristics is inefficient. We strive to define our target segment by ideology and ways of thinking. Therefore, we assume that our target segment consists of independent, adventurous travelers, who place importance on social values. To put it simply: idealists, modern hippies and globetrotting backpackers. At this point and time, we reach our customer segment best through word of mouth, earned media, and blogs.

3. In your opinion, what are the most significant challenges in initiating and maintaining community-based ecotourism projects?

Voipio: The aforementioned locating and reaching customers as well as effective scaling of the projects.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The case studies chosen for examination purposes in this thesis represent unique locations, advantages, and constraints, generating a relatively comprehensive perspective on community-based ecotourism. For the purposes of addressing the research questions stated at the beginning of this paper, a selection of the best practices and common challenges have been assembled below. Before progressing onward, it is worth noting that the two do not necessarily always cancel each other out and many of the assembled best practices complement each other. The achievement and implementation of best practices in a community-based ecotourism development plan present a challenge in itself for this very reason.

5.1. Best practices

To ensure the greatest chance of success in a community-based ecotourism venture, focus should be applied not only on individual characteristics but also take into account the cohesiveness of the complete ecotourism model and tailor the service to suit its unique requirements.

Community education on environmental awareness, sustainable action in the tourism industry, and community involvement in participation and decision making are perhaps the most reoccurring trends appearing in the above case examples. The precise way to go about encouraging community participation however, requires an understanding of the current level of participation in the community, which we discussed earlier.

Along with the assessment of existing community participation, the consistent monitoring and measuring of the positive and negative impacts of ecotourism on the destination, as well as critical and periodical monitoring of the overall development of the project is counted to be among the best practices for CBET-development in this thesis.

In the case of the community-based ecotourism initiative in Oaxaca, Mexico, the research strongly supported the implementation of ecotourism as a larger conservation effort.

This thesis agrees with these findings as a larger conservation effort could help with controlling the visitor capacity of the project and ensure that ecological and cultural conservation remains the top priority. To further compliment this, the development plans should be intertwined with the socioeconomic development of the community.

Sufficient financial support is also an important factor to ensure success, as with any business venture. However, this paper suggests that financial support should be prioritized through NGOs and trust funds to maintain a majority of community control over the initiative. Advisory support and training is also worth listing here among the best practices as local residents rarely possess pre-existing expertise in the realm of business and management. CBET-initiatives should also strive to produce food and other products locally to maximize the financial multiplier effect and minimize economic leakage.

This thesis agrees with the notion that effective CBET-projects are owned by the community itself, promoting empowerment. This may create conflict among other stakeholders, which leads to the next addition to the list of best practices: communication. Simpson (2007) suggests that an effective approach to resolving difficulties resulting from the initiation of a CBET project is to emphasize communication methods, such as workshops where all stakeholders are involved in each stage of development. During these workshops, stakeholders could discuss mutually agreeable outcomes, enabling shared decision-making while still granting the community empowerment over their own initiatives and securing fair distribution of benefits and costs, with a strong emphasis on indirect benefits.

Highlighting the aforementioned points and complimenting the stakeholder workshops comes the involvement of facilitators. There are two types of conflicts: constructive and destructive. Constructive conflict should be pursued to improve relationships (Jamal & Getz). Facilitators transform destructive conflict into constructive dialogue. Facilitators in a community setting can be hired consultants, NGOs or government representatives. In practice, facilitators promote the building of respectful relationships by empowering stakeholders, especially community representatives.

Governmental support for CBET-initiatives is also a crucial factor regarding success. To achieve this, the conservation efforts and ecotourism projects must be sufficiently attractive alternatives to the government, rather than logging and conversion for agricultural or other such purposes.

As the final pick for best practices, this thesis, reinforced by a study conducted by J. Liu et al. (2013) places particular importance on social capital. "Unlike physical, financial,

and human capital, social capital is relatively abstract, and is always defined in terms of the degree of connectedness and the quality and quantity of social relations within a given population” (Ecclestone & Field, 2003; Harpham, Grant & Thomas, 2002; Putnam, Leonardi & Nanetti, 1993). Social capital can be divided into two types: cognitive and structural (Bain & Hicks, 1998; Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005; Krishna & Shrader, 2000). Cognitive social capital includes values, attitudes, norms, and beliefs (Jones, 2005; Krishna & Shrader, 2000), as well as concepts of support, reciprocity, sharing, and trust among members of a specific population (Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005, 2010). Structural social capital encompasses the composition, practices, and scope of local formal and informal institutions, that assist in the orchestration of mutually beneficial collective action (Krishna & Shrader, 2000). To put it simply, cognitive social capital is tied to what people feel and structural capital relates to what people do (Harpham et al., 2002; Jones, 2005). The study found that, social capital has a significant role in the success of community-based ecotourism initiatives and can potentially be a bigger player than, for instance financial incentives. According to Petty and Ward (2001) social capital helps to lower transaction costs of working together and also increases confidence on an individual level, prompting it more likely for community members to invest in collective actions. This makes sense as with the previous study of Waluma, where the community was said to be exceptionally cohesive, translated into a higher level of participation and working together. Social capital has been studied in a variety of topics, including environmental sustainability. Jones (2005) and Lehtonen (2004) found that in order for both the environment and residents to attain mutual benefits, social capital has an important role in local-level common resource management. For the environmental activation of a community, both cognitive and structural social capital were found to have positive connections to success in biodiversity (Jones, 2010).

5.2. Common challenges

Along with the best practices, this thesis has presented the most common challenges associated with community-based ecotourism, below. The purpose of this approach is to identify possible problems in initiating a brand new ecotourism venture and to pinpoint solutions to these problems discussed in the “best practices” segment of this thesis, therefore cultivating the knowledge to effectively and pre-emptively tackle these challenges.

“Failure is now accepted as a norm and a success is considered an exception” (Mitchell and Muckosy, 2008). Many researchers claim that the failures encountered in community-based ecotourism are largely due to the implementation techniques (Mowford & Munt, 2009). Unequal power relationships are also noted as a cause of failure, as well as limited knowledge on the needs of the tourism industry. Another problem in CBET could be the lack of critical scrutiny, giving the chance for such things as community participation to be used in name only. In worst cases, CBET initiatives often enforce western environmentalism, without granting the local community actual power. In effect this is neo-colonialism. Researchers also argue, that local people may not and almost never do have the management skills to entirely run these initiatives. This creates a conflict, because to fully empower the community, they must be given power over the operation.

However, many researchers doubt the possibility of implementing community participation. The participatory approach is also time-consuming. Other barriers include lack of education, business inexperience, insufficient financial assistance and conflicting interests, high transaction costs in starting the program as well as maintenance. Governmental and other stakeholders often do not see local people as equal partners and as a byproduct of this phenomenon, backlash in local residents may result in hostile behavior towards tourists.

The difficulty of current participation assessment also presents a significant challenge, which can lead to incorrect ways of progression and ultimately, unwanted outcomes. The nature of community-based ecotourism means that it is also vulnerable to its political landscape and financially dependent on seasonal fluctuations.

Rural communities are often very cohesive, which can translate to trust issues towards outsiders, presenting a time consuming challenge in development. The often fragile culture of the community also presents a risk of cultural commodification and the harming of culture and traditions, when implementing development practices.

Local communities are also often slower to react to the existing opportunities their community has to offer ecotourism than foreign businesses, which can lead to communities being taken advantage of, and ultimately, as mentioned before: cultural commodification. Other key challenges in community-based ecotourism are issues related with capacity, difficulty securing promotional aid for projects and costly infrastructure development.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings of this thesis are based on research of six ecotourism projects, operating in different geographical areas with their own limitations and requirements, but maintaining somewhat similar views on the important aspects that when focused on, may lead to success in the field. Consequently, no standardized results can be presented. However, upon examining the statistics of ecotourism, it is clear that the growth of community-based ecotourism as well as the acceleration of public demand brings us to a conclusion that the future is bright for community-based ecotourism. It is likely, that ecotourism will enjoy a rise of popularity in the future and possibly even overtake consumptive tourism in the international market. The trend that we are seeing today, indicates that sustainability and ethics are no longer an added bonus in the field of tourism, but are rapidly becoming a requirement.

One of the most surprising finds was the emphasis placed on community participation in most of the literature studied for the preparation of this thesis. Coincidence, however, can be ruled out, and this can be explained by the nature of community-based ecotourism. Without the cooperation of the community, all efforts to provide an authentic and beneficial experience for all parties involved is lost, and we end up with the same result as traditional tourism, with local residents becoming a victim to tourism rather than benefitting from it.

Regarding the research questions, this thesis is capable of providing comprehensive, if not standardized answers from the case studies examined. Further research and periodic monitoring, however, is required to provide more insight into the nature of community-based ecotourism development.

What aspects define a successful community-based ecotourism enterprise?

The literature examined for this thesis suggest that community empowerment and shared decision-making among all stakeholders are the keys to a successful community-based ecotourism enterprise. Other aspects are dependent on ecological, cultural and political landscape and therefore must be tailored to meet those requirements, but regardless of location and model, the vast majority of evidence points to community empowerment and

shared decision-making to be the foundation on which to build a long-term community-based ecotourism initiative generating positive impacts.

How can these aspects be implemented into a development strategy for a community-based ecotourism model?

The process of community empowerment can be actualized by assessing the current level of participation in the community and gauging the willingness for further participation.

Arnstein's ladder of citizen engagement can be used regardless of the geographical location and culture of the proposed site for the project. When the current situation is established, a local leader should be picked to represent the community in the context of the ecotourism initiative. From here, the communication methods explained by Simpson (2008) should be implemented to achieve mutually agreeable outcomes for all stakeholders. When these actions have been successfully implemented, the development of the ecotourism venture can commence.

Besides the heterogeneous nature of community-based ecotourism, the lack of consistent and periodic studies conducted over a significant amount of time presented a challenge when writing this thesis. Success-rate is difficult to assess without follow-up studies to back up or disprove the hypotheses and present additional findings. For this reason, I recommend further monitoring of the progress and impacts as the development of an ecotourism project unfolds. I find that the learning process in these initiatives could potentially point out design weaknesses and provide alternative answers for sustainable tourism efforts in the future.

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